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## A Greek Inscription and Architectural Fragments, Possibly of a Synagogue, from Sejara (Ilaniya)

Jonathan Price and Mordechai Aviam

*Abstract:* An unexcavated ancient building in the ruins of the Arab village of Sejara is tentatively identified as a synagogue from the Roman or Late Roman period. This suggestion is based on architectural fragments found on the site, in the modern village Ilaniya and at a nearby moshav, as well as an inscription in secondary use photographed in the 1920s. The surviving portion of the dedicatory text seems to mention two women with Latin names, Lucilla and Sacerdotilla, the second being quite rare.

*Keywords:* Sejara, Synagogue, Galilee, Greek Inscription.

The ruins of the Arab village of Sejara are located on the eastern slope of a small hill northwest of the modern village of Ilaniya. The Arab village of Sejara was abandoned in 1948 and its houses were destroyed a few years later. Since the end of the nineteenth century, visitors such as De Saulcy<sup>1</sup> and Guérin have mentioned the ancient remains in the village; Guérin described “a rectangular building ... in west-east direction, about 10 m. on and 6 m. wide ... with six monolithic columns and few capitals nearby...”<sup>2</sup> The early visitors thought the building to be a temple or a church; Guérin suggested that it had been converted into a mosque, as there was a mihrab to the south. Guérin also mentioned two fragments of Greek inscriptions found at the site.

Since the 1960s, scholars have suggested that the building could have been a synagogue. In this article we will try to analyze the epigraphical and architectural evidence and test the hypothesis that it indicates a synagogue building.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> De Saulcy, *Voyage en Syrie et autour de la Mer Mort II*. Paris 1875, 457.

<sup>2</sup> M.V. Guérin, *Description Géographique, Historique et Archéologique de la Palestine*, Vol. 3, Paris 1880, 183–184.

<sup>3</sup> We would like to thank Dr. Eric Gould, Dr. Esti Yanelivitch, Ester Stepman and Yossi Buchman for their help. It was Dr. Gould who alerted us to the inscription and sent the photo of it, after Dr. Yankelevitch discovered it in the British Mandate records of the antiquities of Sejara. All those mentioned here helped us to locate the architectural fragments in the modern settlements.

## THE INSCRIPTION (FIG. 1)



**Figure 1:** \*The inscription in its location in the Arab building.

A rectangular stone with three partial lines of Greek text was found in the 1920s built into the stone wall of a stable. The readings and data presented here are based on an unclear photograph and an information sheet found in the archives of the British Mandatory government.

The rough-hewn stone in secondary use measures 45 cm. in length and is 25 cm. high. The three lines of Greek measure, from first to last line, 42, 40 and 33 cm. Letters are reported to be 5-6 cm. high.

The right, left and bottom edges are clearly broken, the top edge looks straight and thus might have been the top of the inscription. If the decipherments offered here are correct, then several words are missing on each side of each line of the preserved text. The Greek is well-executed by an experienced hand, although the inscriber did not use ruled lines, so that the lines are not straight and the letters are not of uniform size, even the same letters in the same lines.

Palaeography is an imprecise instrument, especially in local epigraphy (i.e., non-governmental texts, which this inscription certainly was), but the letter-forms place the text roughly in the third-fifth centuries CE, probably on the later side of that range.<sup>4</sup>

The following letters can be tentatively determined from the photograph<sup>5</sup>:

[--]ΣΛΟΥΧ/ΚΙΛΛΗΣΤΑΣΚ[--]

[--]ΣΑΚΕΡΔΩΤΙΛΛΗΣ[--]

[--]ΑΤΗΓΑ/Φ/ΙΟΥΔ[--]

<sup>4</sup> This is based on comparison of the letters in the inscription, particularly letters whose form changed most significantly over time, like *lambda* and *omega*, with the charts in L. Di Segni, *Dated Greek inscriptions from Palestine from the Roman and Byzantine Periods*, PhD Dissertation, Hebrew University, Jerusalem 1997, see the tables on 894ff.

<sup>5</sup> I (JJP) am grateful to Avner Ecker and Walter Ameling for their assistance in deciphering the text.

## NOTES ON READING:

Line 1. The right side of the initial *sigma* on the left is visible and could conceivably be another letter, such as *epsilon*. The *lambda* is also not clear, it could be a *delta* but is probably a *lambda* in light of what follows. Similarly, the fifth legible letter is more reasonably rendered as *kappa* (and not *chi*) in order to yield a sensible word. The *iota* after that letter is faint but legible, thus one can read the name Λουκίλλη = Lucilla, a female Latin name. Combining the following *sigma* to the name would render Λουκίλλης in the genitive, which would be natural in a dedication beginning with formula like ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας, thus we might tentatively propose the following reading: [ὑπὲρ σωτηρία]ς Λουκίλλης τᾶς Κ[--], where Κ is the start of a name, either her father or husband: “for the salvation of Lucilla, daughter/wife of Κ--”.

Lucilla, the female form of the Roman *nomen gentilicium* Lucillus, is amply attested in both Greek and Latin;<sup>6</sup> the mere name does not indicate ethnicity. In Iudaea/Palaestina, the name Lucilla has been suggested by the editor of an inscription found on a mortar in Jerusalem: M(yrtili) D(omitiae) P(ublii) f(iliae) L(ucillae) s(ervi) (opus) “(Work) of Myrtilus, slave of Domitia Lucilla daughter of Publius” (CIIP I.2, App. 33). This is of course conjectural, but interesting if true, for Domitia Lucilla was the mother of the emperor Marcus Aurelius. While there is nothing overtly Jewish about the present inscription, it should be mentioned, in light of the possible synagogue nearby, that there is one known Jewish example of Lucilla, found in the catacombs of Rome.<sup>7</sup> The present Lucilla may or may not have been a Roman citizen, freeborn or a freedwoman; not enough data are available to tell.

Line 2. The first two letters on the left are faint but ΣΑ is fairly certain, thus all the surviving letters in this line can be deciphered: ΣΑΚΕΡΔΩΤΙΛΛΗΣ. The question is how to parse the line. It is tempting to read them all as one name in the genitive, as in the previous line, Σακερδωτίλλης, “of Sacerdotilla”, another female Latin name. It is also possible to read the male name Σακέρδως in the dative Σακέρδωτι followed by another Roman name in either the genitive or dative, e.g., Λ(ουκίου) Λησ[--] (Λησίου?). The genitive would indicate the father of Sacerdos. But the simpler solution is “of Sacerdotilla”, which is a natural name-formation based on Sacerdos, a Roman male name with the original meaning “priest”. The name Sacerdotilla is attested in at least one Christian Greek epitaph from Rome (εὐμύρι μήτηρ μετὰ Σακ[ε]ρδωτίλ|λας θυγατρός | σου οὐδὲς ἀθά|νατος εαίου(?), ICUR 15878). In Iudaea/Palaestina, the name Sacerdos is found in a Greek inscription at Beth She‘arim, in a text which interestingly uses Christian terms of devotion: Κύριε μνήσθηθι τοῦ δούλου σου Σακέρδωτος.<sup>8</sup> Despite the original Latin meaning of the word *sacerdos*, there is no reason to think that people bearing this name had priestly family connections, titles or functions, and certainly not Sacerdotilla of this inscription.

<sup>6</sup> For 13 Greek examples, unsurprisingly all in the East, see *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names* online, s.v. Λουκίλλα: [http://clas-lgpn2.classics.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/lgpn\\_search.cgi](http://clas-lgpn2.classics.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/lgpn_search.cgi).

<sup>7</sup> *JWE* 2, no. 327.

<sup>8</sup> M. Schwabe and B. Lifshitz, *Beth She‘arim, Volume II: The Greek Inscriptions*, Jerusalem 1974, 167 no. 184 = *CIIP* V, 7163, forthcoming.

Line 3. It is difficult to squeeze much sense out of the legible letters in this line. If the fifth legible letter is an *iota* and not *phi* or *alpha*, interpreting the squiggle around it as e.g. a defect on the stone or a mistake by the inscriber, it is possible to imagine στρ]ατηγίου, which could refer to a praetor or praetorium,<sup>9</sup> or alternatively — probably — some local office, since local councilors could be titled *strategoi*. If this reading is correct, it probably refers to a man whose name appeared in the missing left-hand portion of the line, but it should be pointed out that women could be *strategoi* in the city, and in Asia Minor there is even an example of Jewish woman holding this position.<sup>10</sup>

From what can be tentatively deciphered, the text seems to be a dedication rather than a funerary inscription. It is notable that the two legible names are of women. Women *euergetai* are not unknown in Greek and Roman civic contexts, in Christian churches and in Jewish synagogues. In the Jewish sphere, it has been estimated that a third of all benefactors in Diaspora synagogues are women.<sup>11</sup> The proximity of the findspot of the stone to the site of an ancient church or synagogue might indicate that it came from there. It should be pointed out that there is nothing overtly Jewish in the inscription, and moreover, given that Roman names were used in the Roman period by Jews, Christians, Greeks and Romans, it is impossible to discern the ethnicity or religious affiliation of the people just from their names.

### Archaeology and Architecture

Various types of evidence, including pottery from a few salvage excavations, coins collected at the sites, burial caves and architectural fragments, prove the existence of the village on the site of Sejara in the Roman and Byzantine periods. The village is located in the center of the Lower Galilee, the heart of the Jewish settlement in the Roman and Byzantine periods. It is surrounded by other settlements, some of which are mentioned in the Mishnah and Talmud; in some of them, remains of synagogues were excavated (Kh. Amudim, Arbel, Kh. Wadi Hamam, Kafer Kana, Kh. Kana, Kafer Miser, and Tiberias), and in other sites, synagogues were identified by means of typical architectural fragments.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> H.J. Mason, *Greek Terms for Roman Institutions*, Toronto 1974, 86.

<sup>10</sup> *IJO* II, no. 173B; P.R. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, Cambridge 1991, 60, 124.

<sup>11</sup> L.I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, New Haven-London 2000, 471-90; B.J. Broton, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues*, originally 1982, digital publication 2020 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvzpv5mr>, see esp. “Appendix: Women as Donors in the Ancient Synagogue”. In general: R. van Bremen, *The Limits of Participation: Women and Civic Life in the Greek East in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods*, Amsterdam 1996; R. Meyers, “On Her Own: Practices of Female Benefaction in the Western Roman Empire”, *Ancient Society* 49, 2019, 327–50.

<sup>12</sup> Z. Ilan, *Ancient Synagogues in Israel* (Tel Aviv 1991), Hebrew, s.v.

It was Gideon Foerster who in the 1960s first suggested that the remains in Sejara belonged to a synagogue. Following his suggestion, Zvi Ilan conducted further surveys and supported this identification.<sup>13</sup>

Architectural fragments can be seen today at Ilaniya and at the ancient site, as at Moshav Sede Ilan. These fragments, all of which are made of hard limestone, were found in close vicinity to the possible location of the above-mentioned building.

A. Ionic capital. (Fig. 2a). This is well-preserved capital (0.6x0.6x0.4 m) is at Moshav Ilaniya, while a similar one (b) is visible in the early photos. Although Ionic capitals are not the most common type of capitals in synagogues, nor exclusive to them, some have been found in excavated synagogues, such as the capitals at Kh. Amudim,<sup>14</sup> Kh. Qana,<sup>15</sup> and Shiḥin.<sup>16</sup> This type of Ionic capital can be cautiously dated to the Late Roman period.



*Figure 2a: An Ionic capital.*

<sup>13</sup> Ilan, 165. Foerster expressed his opinion in oral communication, never committed it to writing.

<sup>14</sup> H. Kohl and Carl Watzinger, *Antiken Synagogen in Galiläa*, Leipzig 1918, 71–79.

<sup>15</sup> D.R. Edwards, “Khirbet Qana: From a Jewish Village to Christian Pilgrim Site,” in *The Roman and Byzantine Near East 3*, edited by J. H. Humphrey, *JRA Supplement* 49, Portsmouth, RI, 2002, 101–32.

<sup>16</sup> J.R. Strange and M. Aviam, “A Roman Period Synagogue at Shiḥin”, forthcoming in a (surprise) Festschrift volume.





*Figure 2b: \*An Ionic capital.*

B. A small (0.4x0.4 with app. 0.3 min diameter) Corinthian capital was photographed in the British Mandate period (Fig. 3), it could belong to a second floor.



*Figure 3: Corinthian capital.*

C. Fragment of decorated lintel. (Fig. 4). This is a 0.6x0.5 m fragment of a lintel, decorated with an amphora and vine with two bunches of grapes, and two leaves. To the right side there are remains of what could be the left side of a seven-branched menorah. Architectural elements which are decorated with this type of vines, grapes and leaves, are very common in ancient synagogues but rare in churches.



**Figure 4:** *Fragment of decorated lintel (after Z. Ilan, 1991.165).*

D. Fragment of a decorated lintel. (Fig. 5). This is a smaller fragment, probably from a lintel, 0.5x0.4 m, decorated with a rosette in a square frame. Similar rosettes are known mainly from other ancient Galilean synagogues.





*Figure 5: Fragment of decorated lintel.*

E. Pedestals. (Fig. 6 a, b, c). Five complete pedestals were identified in the courtyards of houses in the moshav (some of which appear in the early photo), not far away from their original site, near the ancient well. They are almost all identical. In three of them, the lower part of the pillar shaft is carved continuously from the same stone. The design of these pedestals is very similar to other pedestals in Galilean synagogues. They are all about 0.7 m high, from the base to the beginning of the shaft.

F. Monolithic pillar (Fig. 7). This monolithic pillar is 2.8 m high, its lower part is 0.55 m in diameter. Adding 0.7 m for a pedestal (for those which were cut with no shaft), and add 0.4 m for the capital renders an order of pillars at least 4.0 m high.

G. A designed lintle. Its design is also typical to the stone decoration of "Mountainous Galilee" group (Fig. 8).



*Figure 6a–b: Pedestals.*



*Figure 6c: Pedestals.*



H. Marble chancel screen post (Fig. 7). the fragment is about half of a typical chancel screen post, made of white marble and decorated in the typical way. This is the only architectural fragment in the group which is not typical for Galilean synagogues. Usually, such screens are to be found in Byzantine churches, but there are chancel screens in the “Valley” group of synagogues, such as Ḥammath Tiberias<sup>17</sup> and Rehov.<sup>18</sup>



*Figure 7: Monolithic pillar.*

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<sup>17</sup> M. Dothan, *Ḥammath Tiberias II*, Jerusalem 2000. Pl. 14.

<sup>18</sup> Z. Ilan, 1991, 187.



*Figure 8: Fragment of a lintel.*



*Figure 9: Marble chancel screen.*





*Figure 10: Large ashlar block.*

## DISCUSSION

The re-discovery of the Sejara inscription and its proposed interpretation as a dedication prompted an attempt to connect it to the architectural fragments from Sejara collected today in Moshav Ilaniya and Moshav Sede Ilan, and to revive Foerster's suggestion that there had once been a synagogue on the site. From the end of the nineteenth century, visitors and scholars have pointed to a spot at the fringes of the Arab village of Sejara, near the springhouse, where they identified a small building (about 6x10 m) with few monolithic lime-stone pillars Fig. 11), a capital and other architectural fragments. A fragment of Greek inscription was also mentioned in an early survey of the Galilee.<sup>19</sup> As this small building was oriented on a west-east axis, they suggested that it was a church or a pagan temple, with Guérin suggesting a mosque, as already stated. It is important to note that the building as described at the end of the nineteenth century is too small to be a normal church, temple, or synagogue (especially with pillars of 0.55m in diameter), but it probably marked the site of one of these.



**Figure 11:** \*Overall view of the well area. Pillars and other architectural fragments are visible.

During our visit to the moshav to reexamine and document the architectural elements, we recorded the above-mentioned architectural elements. Some of them are typical of the “monumental” synagogues which belong to the “Mountainous Galilee” group,<sup>20</sup> such as the pedestals, the pillars and the decorated freeze. It is true that the marble chancel screen post is rare among the “Mountainous Galilee” group, but here and

<sup>19</sup> C.R. Conder and H.H. Kitchener, *The Survey of Western Palestine I*, London 1881 repr. 1970, 414 = CIIP V, 6888, forthcoming.

<sup>20</sup> M. Aviam, “The Ancient Synagogues in Galilee”, *Early Christianity* 10/3, 2019, 292–314.

there a few fragments have been found, such as a decorated table at Amuqa,<sup>21</sup> marble pieces of a menorah at Huqoq,<sup>22</sup> as well as some architectural elements from other synagogues in nearby Tiberias.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, there are many large limestone ashlar blocks at the site, similar to those at the synagogue of Baram or Capernaum, and other synagogues of the “Mountainous Galilee” group.

Although Greek inscriptions on stones are not common among the synagogues of the “Mountainous Galilee” group, and in fact were found only at Beth She‘arim (on marble tables), Qazion and Capernaum, and although there are no clues in the inscription of a religious/ethnic identity of the people mentioned, we would like tentatively to suggest that the architectural fragments and the inscription come from a synagogue.

Concerning the suggestion that the building was a church, it is noteworthy that among the many architectural fragments there is none which is decorated with a cross or other Christian symbol. Most of the churches we know from Galilee are neither built with big ashlar blocks nor decorated with the same type of stone ornamentation.

Concerning the suggestion that it was a pagan temple, there is simply no parallel for such a building in rural Lower Galilee during the period in question; on the contrary, the area was dotted with many Jewish villages.

There is a possibility that the small building identified in the nineteenth century — which cannot be checked today — was indeed a mosque that reused architectural elements and perhaps even part of the original wall of an ancient synagogue. A similar phenomenon was identified at the synagogue of Qazrin when a small mosque was built in the northern part of the synagogue, while the rest of the building was in ruins.<sup>24</sup> Another example comes from H. Zonam in Western Upper Galilee, when a Mamluk period mosque was built over the possible remains of a church, reusing two inverted pillars.<sup>25</sup>

**List of photos:** For all photos marked with \*, the record is part of the Israel Archive Network project (IAN) and has been made accessible thanks to the collaborative efforts of the Israel Antiquities Authority Archive, the Ministry of Jerusalem and Heritage and the National Library of Israel.

Tel Aviv University (Price)  
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<sup>21</sup> Z. Ilan, 1991, 53.

<sup>22</sup> I thank Jodi Magness for this information.

<sup>23</sup> See footnote 16.

<sup>24</sup> Z.U. Mao'z, “Qasrin, the Synagogue”, *NEAEHL*, 1993, 1222.

<sup>25</sup> M. Aviam and D. Shalem, *The Land of Lost Villages, Shomera Map Survey*, Land of Galilee 6, Kinneret College, 2020. 36\*–37\*.